

North Memphis Driving Park (Race track)
1450 No. Thomas Street
Memphis
Shelby County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-170

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NORTH MEMPHIS DRIVING PARK (Race track)

HABS No. TN-170

Location: 1450 North Thomas Street, Memphis
Shelby County, Tennessee.
Latitude: 35° 10' 51"
Longitude: 90° 02' 6.5"

Present Owner: Lazarov Surplus Sales Company, which uses the former track
as a salvage yard.

Significance: Constructed in 1901, the North Memphis Driving Park
quickly gained national prominence as the fastest track of
the Grand Circuit. Conceived by C. K. G. Billings and
Frank Jones, the design was accomplished by Seth Griffin,
a specialist in the field. The track was opened October
21, 1901, and in its brief first season ten harness racing
records were broken; seventeen more records were
established during the following season. Every major
pacing and trotting record was set at the park. Memphis
was dropped from the Grand Circuit in 1905 as the result
of a state prohibition against gambling on races. The
only remaining portion of this great track is the carriage
gateway.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1901.
2. Architect: Seth Griffin, Readville, Massachusetts, designed
the track. He was a specialist in track design.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following incomplete
chain of title, which covers the period before this tract was
used for racing and until that activity ceased, may be
established from the Register of Deeds and the Minutes of
Chancery Court in Shelby County.

1898 Decree March 25, 1898, recorded March 25, 1898 in
Chancery Minute Book 104 page 572 (#8811 RD)
Chancery Court
to
D. E. Myers

1901 Deed July 1, 1901, recorded September 18, 1901 in Book
300 page 125 (236 acres - \$25,000.00)
D. E. Myers and
Emma H. Myers (wife)
to
Highland Real Estate Company (which held title to the
North Memphis Driving Park)

1928 Deed February 2, 1928, recorded February 10, 1928 in
Book 1173 page 179 (\$10.00)
Highland Real Estate Company
to
Union Real Estate Company

The property was then subdivided; the portion upon which the carriage gate is located now belongs to the Lazarov Surplus Sales Company.

- B. Historical Context: The North Memphis Driving Park was built in 1901 under a crash program to be ready for the fall meet of the Grand Circuit, which was to close the season of important American harness races in Memphis on October 21-26. In the interest of timely completion, work commenced in January on land which was not actually purchased until July. Funding was provided by C. K. G. Billings of Chicago, son of the late owner of the Memphis Street Railway Company. The Billings interests in Memphis were supervised by Frank Jones, manager of the railway company; he was given a blank check and was instructed to build the world's fastest mile harness track. Jones hired Seth Griffin of Readville, Massachusetts and proceeded to do just that. In its inaugural meet the new park was the scene of ten new world records.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that street railway companies throughout the country were involved in developments (parks, beaches, zoos and the like) having as a part of their design the assumption that the public would ride the parent company's streetcars to reach the new attraction. This was true of the North Memphis Driving Park; its opening day advertisement proclaimed it "only a ten minute ride by street car from Court Square." The equine nature of the Memphis scheme stemmed from the fact that both C. K. C. Billings and Frank Jones were top flight amateur drivers and the owners of some of the racing cracks of the day.

The full story of this park's blaze of glory, and of its unfortunate demise (after Tennessee outlawed betting, causing the Memphis track to be dropped from the Grand Circuit in 1905), has been told by Charles Bobbitt in the article cited in Sources of Information (Part III).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Description:

1. Condition of fabric: The Driving Park no longer exists. The site is occupied by a salvage yard. The only remaining portion of the complex is the carriage gate. This gate is still used as the entrance to the yard. The pedestrian gates to either side of the carriage gate are not operable at present. The carriage gate is damaged from carelessness on the part of drivers entering the yard. The stone piers are still standing although one is damaged after being struck by a truck.
2. Plan: The entrance gate (carriage gate) is located at what was the southwest corner of the track. It faces onto Thomas Street. The remaining gate structure extends north and south along Thomas.
There are four piers in a straight line. Two additional piers are to the sides and positioned about five feet to the west of that line. A convex portion of wrought iron fence connects these piers with the major composition. The convex fence and lateral piers are from a later date as the fence was originally constructed of wood pickets.
3. Piers: There are four large piers in the major composition. All have a brick core and are faced with a 4" rusticated stone veneer. The centermost piers into which the gates are anchored measure 3' square and stand 11'-6" high. They have a stone base, stand 12 courses high, have a simple cut stone cornice and are topped with a rough textured stone dome. The piers are outfitted with a conduit in the center for electric lights. The lights were not in the original construction and are not in position today. The second set of piers are somewhat smaller than the centermost pair. They measure 2'-6" square x 8'-6" high. They resemble the larger set but have 8 courses of stone. These four piers are laid out on a north-south axis with their centers aligned. There are also the two lateral piers mentioned in Plan. They are approximately five feet west of the four major piers. They are crude imitations of the major piers. They are 2'-0" square and 6'-3" high, and have no bases. The stone is coarser in detail and the cornice block is merely a flat stone with no articulation.

4. Gates: There is a double carriage gate between the larger piers and there are pedestrian gates to each side for a totally symmetrical composition (see sheet 2 of attached drawings). The gates are wrought iron with bars varying in size from $3/8"$ x $1"$ to $1/2"$ x $1/2"$. Each leaf of the carriage gate measures $9'-8"$ wide by $5'-5"$ high, at the center of the gateway, and $9'-6"$ high at the anchor pier. The main composition is contained within a rectangular $9'-8"$ x $5'-2"$. Within is a $3'-0"$ x $7'-6"$ wide grid (6 squares high x 15 squares wide). Between these two rectangles is scrollwork and loops. In the angle created by the panel and the gate anchor arm additional scroll motif is employed. Within the large rectangle of each gate leaf the composition is symmetrical. The strapping which creates the edges of the grid do not meet to form a definite corner but evolves into the scrollwork. Some strapping crossing the grid also erupts into the scrollwork.

The pedestrian gates are a variation of the large gate design. They have a rectangular composition $4'-6"$ wide and $5'-0"$ high, with a grid of $2'-8"$ wide x $3'-4"$ high (6 squares x 6 squares). The poles to which the gates are attached are $2"$ square and have spear-like tops. Bands of wrought iron wrap around these poles and are inserted in the stone of the piers.

5. Fence: The original fence was of wood pickets. The present fence follows a convex curve between the piers (as seen from the west, street side). The fence is of wrought iron spikes (square), alternating long and short. The fence is $4'$ high.
6. Race track: The one mile track was laid out with an axis from northeast to southwest. The design included fourteen stables, a large clubhouse, the grandstands, a private clubhouse, paddock and a residence for the Secretary of the Memphis Trotters Association. There was also a 65,000 gallon water tower. At the center of the track was laid out a golf course (Memphis' second course).

The grandstands could seat 3,500 and were of metal construction and a wood roof. They were situated on the west side of the park facing east because most of the races were held in the afternoon. The grandstands were sold to the Fair Association, Jackson, Tennessee. The record breaking track was laid out by Seth Griffin of Readville, Massachusetts.

The portion of the Driving Park which contained the entranceway described in this report, is owned by the Lazarov Surplus Sales Company, 1450 North Thomas Street.

(The above information on the track is derived from The Passing of an Era: The North Memphis Driving Park, Charles A. Bobbitt, mns, 1972).

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

Bobbitt, Charles. "The North Memphis Driving Park. 1901-1905; The Passing of an Era." West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, XXVI (1972). pp. 40-55.

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